

Article



Miku's mask: Fictional encounters in children's costume play

Childhood

1–15

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Abstract

Children's engagement with Japanese toys and fictional characters has taken on new significance in the age of YouTube. Drawing on ethnographic research on technology-mediated play among 8- and 9-year-olds in Norway, this article shows how boundaries between "real" humans and "fake" non-humans are blurred and undermined when children take on the perspective of a fictional pop star known as Miku. I argue that YouTube provides a platform for children's playful experimentation with posthuman subjectivities, where they orient themselves toward the future not in terms of becoming adult but in terms of multiple becomings.

Keywords

Animism, becoming, cosplay, play, YouTube

Quietly seated in front of a laptop computer, 9-year-old Matilde and two of her friends are watching a Japanese YouTube video.¹ On the screen, hundreds of people have gathered in front of a concert stage, waving green glow sticks in the air in anticipation of the upcoming show. Miku suddenly appears from a cloud of smoke on the stage, and the audience cheers enthusiastically as the pop star smiles and waves back at them. The camera zooms in on Miku as she starts singing, and the crowd can be heard singing along to the familiar lyrics. Soon, however, Miku's impressive vocal range and pace make it impossible for the audience to keep up with her singing.

Dressed in cyan blue to match the color of her characteristic pigtails, Miku, like most of the audience, appears to be in her mid-teens. She stands out from the crowd in front of her, however, not only because she is a pop star but also because she is not human. Projected on a large transparent screen on stage, Miku's performance was digitally

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Figure 1. Vocaloid vocal synthesizer software, featuring Hatsune Miku.

Source: http://www.crypton.co.jp/miku_eng, reproduced with permission from Crypton Future Media.

created ahead of the actual concert. For Matilde and her friends, as for the spectators on the screen, Miku's cartoonish rather than realistic appearance leaves no doubt that she is not human. In addition to her sudden appearance and disappearance in clouds of smoke, the spectators are again reminded of the pop star's non-human characteristics when, near the end of the show, a pair of wings emerge from Miku's shoulders, lifting her high above the stage.

Originally designed by the Japanese company Crypton Future Media, Miku was created as a mascot to illustrate the cover of their "Hatsune Miku" vocal synthesizer software released in 2007 (see Figure 1). Created using Yamaha's Vocaloid technology, the software allows users to create their own music through vocal synthesis by typing Japanese lyrics and adjusting features like pitch trajectory and vibrato. On Miku's

official Facebook page, the software is described as capable of singing “any song that anybody composes.”² The company allowed fans to use images of Miku freely, and soon a plethora of fan-created music videos appeared on video-sharing websites such as NicoNicoDouga and YouTube (Condry, 2013). Miku’s growing fan base guided the company’s decision to design an animated version of the pop star, who could perform user-created songs on stage. Accordingly, Miku’s fans play a key role in her actualization on stage, not only as spectators but also as creators of the songs she performs.

Throughout the 20th century, new technologies have been widely used by artists and performers to enhance, distort, or otherwise alter their products and performances. In the 1950s, American pop artists such as Alvin and the Chipmunks revolutionized the use of analogue recording techniques by manipulating the pitch and tempo of recorded voices to create inhuman vocal harmonies. The use of visual effects to create the illusion of sudden appearance and disappearance was a defining feature of the early 20th century science fiction films by French director George Méliès. When Miku moves around on stage, apparently with no outside manipulation, she can be seen as the latest in a long tradition of technology-mediated attempts to highlight and explore the possibilities and limitations of the human body.

Since videos from her live shows appeared online in 2009, Miku has become increasingly popular among children and youth worldwide, with several videos reaching millions of views on YouTube. Performances outside Japan, such as the 2014 tour of North America as the opening act for Lady Gaga, also indicate a growing interest in the phenomenon. Described by fans as an open-source artist who represents “an image of thousands of artists,”³ Miku provides a platform allowing fans to expand on the character rather than just watching her perform. The fictional pop star is therefore best understood not as an *object* in the sense of a complete form, but as a sample of *material*, providing a potential for further transformation (Ingold, 2012). Miku’s ambiguous materiality provides a starting point for understanding how children, in their playful engagement with toys and fictional characters, become “creators of their own worlds” (Ruckenstein, 2013: 17).

In the 1990s, the emerging field of childhood studies aimed at taking children seriously as active and capable subjects, in response to the tendency in earlier research to treat children as incompetent adults-to-be. By emphasizing children’s agency, however, little attention was given to the assumption of a stable and autonomous subject underpinning the concept of agency. In a critical examination of earlier studies, Lee (2001) argues that what he calls our age of uncertainty is characterized by a fluidity that requires us to consider both adults and children as incomplete and unfinished. Rather than assuming that children are simply becoming adults, we need to account for “many different states of becoming” in children’s lives (Lee, 2001: 114). Elaborating on Lee’s approach, Prout (2005) suggests that children’s multiple becomings emerge through “hybridization,” when human and non-human entities merge to “create something new” (p. 113).

Lee and Prout’s influential attempt to dethrone the human subject in favor of multiple becomings resonates with contemporary feminist philosophy such as Braidotti’s (2013) posthumanist approach. Like them, she criticizes social constructivist perspectives for assuming a categorical distinction between nature and culture, which she suggests replacing with a monist, non-dualistic understanding of material flows across human and non-human domains. Rather than assuming that subjectivity pre-exists in individual

subjects, the analysis is a matter of understanding how action produces subjectivity. Opposing the inherent techno-pessimism and moral panic in much contemporary social theory, Braidotti celebrates the nomadic, non-unitary posthuman subjects that are currently emerging. Although she does not address children specifically, Braidotti's posthumanism suggests a constructive addition to Lee and Prout's approach to contemporary childhoods in terms of multiple becomings. New technologies provide crucial components for experimentation with heterogeneous subjectivities and are thus central to the emergence of what Prout (2005) terms "new forms of childhood" (p. 114).

Ethnographic context and research design

This article investigates children's YouTube-mediated play in contemporary Norway. The ethnographic material was collected during fieldwork in 2012–2013 among 20 children (10 girls, 10 boys) in Kristiansand, a city of 85,000 inhabitants in the south of Norway. Aiming to improve our understanding of literacy practices among immigrant families, the research project was designed to investigate children's engagement with new technologies in their everyday lives. I initially spent time in the local primary school in order to get to know the children and their families. Gradually expanding the scope of inquiry to include arenas outside school, I joined the children as they hung out in the local neighborhood, played video games, and watched YouTube videos. Over time, I was invited to join activities at the local youth club, family gatherings, and weekend trips out of town, allowing me to include the children's siblings, friends, and parents in the study. In this article, I focus on play activities initiated by the children themselves, rather than activities organized by adults.

During the first month of fieldwork, I wrote down fieldnotes while joining the children in their everyday activities in and out of school. By showing interest in the activities they found meaningful, I gradually modified my research questions based on the children's interests. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) refer to this approach as methodological immaturity, where they understand immaturity not as a lack, but as an openness to the new and unexpected that allows researchers access to otherwise inaccessible topics and activities. Although not an explicit part of my original research design, the children's engagement with Japanese popular culture soon caught my interest. Pokémon cards, hand-held Nintendo video games, and Japanese YouTube videos were prevalent features of the children's peer culture. For example, one boy taught himself origami after watching a YouTube tutorial⁴ and later taught other kids how to fold paper ninja stars. Early on, I found that my notes on these topics were heavily biased toward the boys' activities. Over time, however, Matilde and her friends introduced me to a world of YouTube-mediated play that had been near invisible to me during the early stage of fieldwork.

I supplemented observational data with tape-recorded conversations with the kids as they watched YouTube videos, played computer games, and navigated online worlds. For practical reasons, most of these sessions took place during school hours, and many of the children enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to partake in activities that were usually out of bounds in school. Children organize their lives in ways that are often independent of, and sometimes in opposition to, researchers' aims and objectives (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). When the children encouraged each other to write

swear words in front of me, or sent insulting online messages to classmates, these subversive practices should not be seen as non-compliance, but as potential data. Researching children's lives requires openness to the often unexpected ways in which children appropriate and manipulate research techniques for their own means (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). A crucial dimension of this openness involves acknowledging that ethnographers, like our informants, are experimenting with an emergent world.

The widespread use of computers among the children in Kristiansand is indicative of a general trend in contemporary Norway. With an estimated 85% of the population spending time online every day, Internet access can be considered near universal in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2014). Most of the children in my study came from relatively low-income households, but still had access to at least one Internet-connected computer at home. Many of the families also owned tablets and smartphones, providing the children with a wide assortment of gadgets for playing games and watching videos online.

Since its launch in 2005, the Google-owned web service YouTube has quickly become one of the primary online destinations for millions of youth worldwide. The children in Kristiansand were no exception, and many of them spent time on YouTube daily. The website allows anyone with an Internet connection to watch or upload videos free of charge, in exchange for watching advertisements between and during video clips. Some of the children told me that they spent far more time on YouTube than their parents knew about, as tablets and smartphones made it possible for them to stay online long after bedtime. Some kids would seek out videos of other people playing video games, allowing them access to games they could not afford or that their parents would not let them play. As such, YouTube practices took place in a largely unofficial world, partly hidden from adults' gaze.

Fakeness and paradox

According to the children in Kristiansand, Miku's defining feature was her fakeness. Matilde elaborated,

She sings and she dances, but she's actually fake ... She can do whatever she wants because she's fake. In one video she started singing, and when she was done she just disappeared. If anyone can get up on that stage and touch her, it will go right through ... It's just like at the cinema. There's a machine inside that box, just like with movies, that's how they get sound. But there's nobody *saying* it. It's just fake. It's not real.⁵

The term "fake" usually carried negative connotations among the children. Concerns about fake Pokémon cards, for example, implied that the owner had been hoaxed or possibly tried to hoax others. Some kids claimed they could tell fake Pokémon cards from authentic ones by closely examining their texture and color, a skill that was treated with awe as well as suspicion by their peers. In discussions about whether such cards were "real" or "fake," fakeness was considered synonymous with inauthenticity. Although the kids sometimes found it difficult to determine whether specific cards were authentic or not, all Pokémon cards were in principle considered either "real" or "fake."

The children's descriptions of Miku's fakeness did not fit into this equation of fake-ness with inauthenticity. Instead, as Matilde's statement suggests, the fictional pop star was considered simultaneously fake and real. As such, Miku directs our attention to the centrality of paradox in human communication. Paradoxes present us with two or more seemingly contradictory communicative frames, but this incommensurability is only apparent. According to Bateson (2000), paradoxes are not logical errors, but crucial guiding principles in human activities such as play, ritual, metaphor, and humor. Rather than indicating a lack of authenticity, Miku's fakeness was a crucial component of her capacity to "do whatever she wants." This is why Miku's sudden disappearance in a cloud of smoke did not break with the illusion of the show, but rather contributed to the spectacle by bringing Miku's ambiguous materiality into view.

A fascination with bodily transcendence was evident in the children's many accounts of how cartoon characters and superheroes had attained their special powers. They expressed detailed knowledge not only about the particular skills exhibited by these fictional characters but also about the origins of their special powers. For example, one girl told her friends about the dog Jake from the animated TV-series *Adventure Time*. At first, she said, he was just a normal dog, but after rolling in some magical mud he was granted special powers that allowed him to change his shape and size at will. On another occasion, a girl recounted in detail how Spiderman got his special powers. In this regard, Miku was somewhat anomalous, as she did not have an explicit myth of origin. When I asked Matilde about Miku's life, she told me, "I don't know the names of her friends and stuff. I just know Miku." According to fans, the fact that she only has "a name and a picture" means that "Miku is what you make her."⁶

Matilde's engagement with Miku was not limited to watching videos on YouTube. With her mother's approval, she had bought a Miku costume online, making it possible for her to dress up and perform as the fictional pop star. During a visit to her home, Matilde showed me a video of herself dressed as Miku, rehearsing dance moves while watching the original performance on YouTube (see Figure 2). Having spent numerous hours practicing the dance, Matilde told me that some of Miku's moves were impossible to perform: "It's possible in one song or another, but not when she moves really fast. That was too difficult."

As pointed out by Schwartzman (1976), studies of children's play have often been content with categorizing play activities, in the process reducing play to an imitation of, or a preparation for, adult life. Although imitation is often a key component of children's play, Matilde's engagement with Miku illustrates how children draw on a wide variety of resources in play that cannot be reduced to an imitation of adult activities. Her costumed performance can be understood as a "socio-technical assemblage" (Prout, 2005: 125), composed of the costume, the fictional pop star, and Matilde's own body. What appears to be an imitation of the fictional pop star exemplifies a playful experimentation with alternative, rhizomatic directions of growth.

Children's bodies are constantly undergoing growth and change, yet in everyday life, these changes are largely imperceptible. By dressing and acting like Miku, however, Matilde explicitly addressed the capabilities and limitations of her body. As such, the event provides support for Prout's (2005) argument that "assemblages supplement and extend human capacities in ways that open up new powers and possibilities" (p. 118).



Figure 2. Matilde dressed up as Miku, dancing while watching YouTube. Images reprinted with permission from Matilde and her mother.

The appearance of disorder in children's play does not indicate a lack of order, but arises "because their activities contain a profusion of different orders which they can move between very rapidly" (Lee, 2001: 141). This analytic path allows us to understand paradoxes in children's play in conjunction with recent anthropological studies of animism.

Early anthropologists applied the term animism to cosmologies characterized by a projection of human characteristics onto the environment. During the 20th century, many scholars rejected the distinction between primitive, animist societies and modern, naturalistic societies, considering it a remnant of the discipline's early reliance on social evolutionism. In the last decade, however, a number of anthropologists have attempted to reformulate and revitalize the animism concept. Willerslev (2007), for example, addresses animism among the Siberian Yukaghirs not in terms of an overarching cosmology, but as a particular, context-dependent way of perceiving the environment. In this perspective, animism and naturalism can co-exist as alternative frameworks of perception rather than corresponding to different kinds of societies.

Although usually characterized as non-human, the children sometimes described Miku as if she were human. For example, when comparing Miku to the popular Pokémon character Pikachu, Matilde told her friends "She's not an animal, she's actually human." Like Pikachu, as described by Allison (2006), Miku appears to be small, cute, and fragile, yet also exhibits great powers. By referring to Miku as "human," Matilde did not necessarily attribute Miku with human intentionality, but with a certain kind of potentiality characteristic of animistic practices (Willerslev et al., 2013). According to proponents of the new animism, as for Lee, Prout, and Braidotti, subjectivity is best understood not as an inherent property of the person, but as a potential that is actualized in particular contexts.

Allison (2006) describes a particular Japanese form of Shinto-infused techno-animism, characterized by a hybridization of humans, animals, spirits, and technology. Japanese video game characters such as the dogs in *Nintendogs* are on the one hand "digital and non-human," yet paradoxically also "living-like beings" (Ruckenstein, 2013: 15). Jensen and Blok (2013) contrast Japanese techno-animism to the "alienation

and fear” characteristic of Western encounters with technology-mediated non-humans (p. 105). Approaching children’s technology-mediated play through the lens of animism can shed useful light on the mechanisms involved when children attribute human characteristics to non-human entities and vice versa.

Play is ubiquitous and easily recognizable in children’s lives, yet ideological underpinnings tend to shape attempts at defining the concept (Sutton-Smith, 2001). One recent study found that children themselves tend to describe play in terms of “fun” (Glenn et al., 2012: 191). As the authors point out, however, discursive conventions and adult expectations often shape children’s descriptions of play, and their verbal accounts are therefore of limited value for developing an analytical concept of play. By considering play instead, like animistic practices, to be primarily characterized by paradox, it becomes clear that play is not necessarily about “fun,” but can be a highly serious matter with much at stake for its participants. Matilde’s engagement with Miku offers an opportunity to understand how new childhoods emerge through playful experimentation with “what we are actually capable of becoming” (Braidotti, 2013: 92).

Cosplay conventions

In June 2013, Matilde and her family invited me on a weekend trip to Desucon, Norway’s largest cosplay convention held annually in Oslo. Cosplay, or costume play, entails expressing fandom by dressing up and performing like fictional characters from anime, movies, or video games. Cosplay has become increasingly popular among Norwegian youth over the last decade, and this year’s Desucon had moved to a larger venue due to the growing number of attendants. Matilde had been introduced to cosplay by her older sister, and together they joined hundreds of others who shared their interest in costumes and popular mythology at Desucon.

Attention to detail is highly valued among cosplayers, and dedicated participants can often be recognized by subtle hints in their costumes. When Matilde first told me about her interest in cosplay, she explicitly stated one of the criteria for cosplay costumes: “You can dress up as anything you want. You can be anything, as long as it’s something someone knows what is.” As the statement suggests, visual recognition is an important dimension of cosplay. As such, it differs from other popular forms of costumed role play such as live-action role playing and historical reenactments, where the role playing aspect often dominates. Whereas some cosplayers attempt to copy a character as faithfully as possible, for example choosing to cosplay only characters that share their physical features, others create altogether new characters or make deliberate changes to existing ones to reflect their personal taste. Although Matilde had bought her costume online rather than sewing it herself, she was highly attentive to getting the details of the costume right. She had studied a YouTube video tutorial on how to put on the wig and make-up,⁷ and stressed the importance of having the right kind of pen to draw the tattoo on Miku’s shoulder. Getting the tattoo right, she said, was difficult, but crucial if she wanted other cosplayers to recognize her as a proper Miku.

Desucon offered a wide range of organized events such as stage shows, Japanese language courses, and role playing competitions. Still, many cosplayers spent much time in the convention hallways or the market place, chatting and exchanging photos with

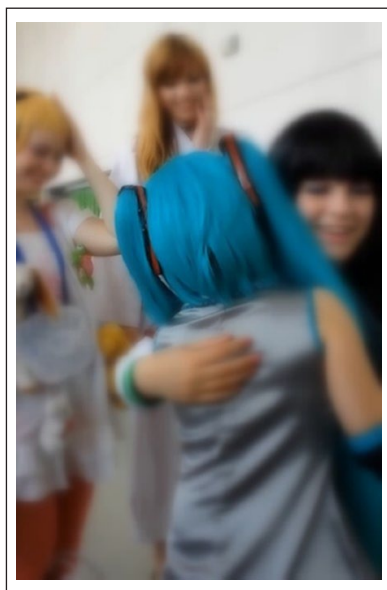


Figure 3. Matilde cosplaying as Miku, exchanging hugs with other participants at Desucon. Photo by the author.

other cosplayers. Walking through the hallways, Matilde was repeatedly approached by other cosplayers who recognized her and wanted their photo taken with her. One teenage boy, dressed as another Vocaloid pop star known as Kaito, approached her with a loud “Miku!” and asked for a hug. As his friends photographed the two together, Kaito told Matilde, “We are from the same place. We are best friends.” Usual thresholds for approaching strangers appeared to diminish during encounters like these, where children, youth, and adults engaged in play together (see Figure 3). Similar findings have been made among cosplayers in the United States, who claim that strangers often “presume a relationship” with them because “they already have a relationship with the character” (Napier, 2007: 162). Exchanging photos and hugs offered Matilde an entry into the cosplay community by providing other cosplayers with an opportunity to engage with a human version of the fake pop star.

People have at all times been fascinated with decorating and altering the human body, and numerous ethnographic accounts describe people who take on non-human bodies and perspectives by wearing animal outfits. Among the Yukaghirs, for example, the hunter can move in and out of personhood and can take on “the appearance and viewpoint” of the prey (Willerslev, 2007: 2). Many cosplayers craft their own costumes, sometimes bringing two or more costumes to a convention so that they can vary their appearance. Others, such as Matilde, become particularly attached to specific costumes, over time developing a sensibility to the character’s movements and perception after hours of rehearsing and performing dance moves, gestures, and poses. Recounting her experience of walking around at Desucon, she explained,

It feels real, but it's not actually real ... I was wearing make-up just like Miku. I changed a little bit with the make-up and hair and costume. I thought a little about what Miku usually does, and then I thought about how I *feel* Miku ... It's kind of like splitting the brain. There are lots of small pieces that are attached. Only it's just two parts, cut through the middle. One is from the Miku-brain, even though it doesn't exist. And one is from myself ... So I thought a little bit that I was fake.

For Matilde, cosplay was not just a matter of dressing and acting like the fictional pop star, but involved an increased attentiveness to Miku's perspective. According to Schechner (1985), performing as a character is not a matter of fully transforming into another being, but of acting "in-between identities" (p. 295). Theatrical performance entails a paradox whereby participants can be "not me" and yet "not not me" (Schechner, 1985: 295). Matilde's statement suggests that she holds a "double perspective" (Willerslev, 2007: 88–89), commonly found in animistic practices, where two apparently exclusive perspectives operate simultaneously.

By taking on the perspective of fictional characters, cosplayers engage in what Walton (1990) refers to as a "deliberate daydream" as they turn fiction into embodied make-believe (pp. 67–68). In Ingold's (2000) terms, the primary purpose of costumes is not to cover the body, but to enable particular skills and dispositions by "opening up ... the person to the world" (p. 94). When Matilde dressed up as Miku at Desucon, she combined and redirected a range of materials in order to draw on the "practical effectivities" (Ingold, 2000: 129) of the fictional pop star.

Embarrassment and the non-human gaze

Despite the many hours of rehearsing and planning, Matilde was not prepared for what met her at Desucon. Here, she recounts a hallway encounter with several other Mikus:

I was just walking around to have a look. Then I saw another Miku, and she started coming towards me. Then she started taking photos. And then lots of people started taking photos ... When one took a photo, lots of other Mikus showed up. So I just had to stand still. I couldn't leave ... There were actually lots of people there, so I felt a little embarrassed. There were so many people, and I thought they stared so much. Because when there's a lot of people, it's like they don't blink at the same time. So when one blinks, another one stares. Then another one blinks, and the other one stares. And then the one who blinked stares, and then the other one begins to stare ... So I get a little confused. I'm a little afraid that they don't like me and stuff.

Like several of her friends, Matilde described herself as a shy person, and told me that she often felt embarrassed in public. At Desucon, however, she reported feeling much more confident than usual. Knowing that others were likely to share her interest in Miku, she engaged in conversations about Japanese popular culture and performed dance moves in public with little or no indication of her usually shy demeanor. Still, the event involving the other Mikus made her feel "embarrassed" and "confused." Although paradoxes usually facilitate cosplayers' management of multiple communication frames, Matilde faced a seemingly unresolvable contradiction when encountering others wearing the same costume.

Embarrassment was a recurrent topic in conversations and games among the children in Kristiansand. In one popular game of truth or dare, participants took turns sharing their most embarrassing experiences. One boy told the others how his mother had taken his photo on the beach during the summer holiday and then “just went right ahead and put it on Facebook. That made me very embarrassed, because many thousands can see it.” This emphasis on being stared at was common among the kids, who often described feeling embarrassed when people stared at them during public performances such as classroom presentations, school parades, or trips to the local shopping center.

Embarrassment and shame are intersubjective in the sense that both entail a gaze that makes a person into “an object in the project of the Other” (Mikkelsen, 2013: 237). Among the children in Kristiansand, this Other was not necessarily human. For example, one girl gave an account of her teddy bears staring at her at night:

When it's dark in my room, sometimes when I lie down to sleep I feel that someone is staring at me. And then it's just the *teddy bears* ... Sometimes my room is very messy, so they turn into lots of things. It's very dark, so I think they look a bit like something. You can only see the shadows ... So once I got very scared, and I had to sleep together with my mom. That teddy bear made me so very scared.

According to Lykke (1996: 16), creatures like Frankenstein's monster come across as monstrous in part because their uncanny gaze contradicts Western ideas about the eyes as the mirror of the soul. When, as in the case of the teddy bears and Miku, there is no identifiable soul or human essence behind the eyes, the ambiguous gaze of someone not fully human can be disconcerting. Although the children knew perfectly well that their teddy bears were unable to harm them, the gaze of the teddy bear could elicit strong feelings of fear. When entering what Willerslev (2007) refers to as the “strange place in between human and nonhuman identities,” the ambivalence that fuels play can also be a source of confusion and fear (p. 1).

When facing the gaze of the other Mikus at Desucon, Matilde encountered an Other that was not fully human, but, like herself, an assemblage composed of human and non-human materials. By partially taking the perspective of someone who can become anything, the costume on the one hand provided Matilde with an opportunity to enter a paradoxical space in-between the human and the non-human. On the other hand, entering this playful double perspective also entailed the possibility of experiencing embarrassment and fear. As she recounts, this human yet inhuman gaze made it difficult for her to maintain the carefully crafted character that was both Matilde and Miku without fully being either. The fragility of Miku's mask was also made explicit when Matilde whispered “Don't say my name” to a family member who kept referring to her as Matilde in front of other cosplayers.

A taste of the future

When the Internet entered the public domain in the late 1980s, it was soon framed as a “fully immersive cyberspace” where users could transcend the limitations of the human body (Brians, 2011: 123). Utopian and dystopian visions of the Internet shared

the often implicit premise that technological change will allow humans to overcome the limitations of the body. A sharp distinction between offline embodiment and online disembodiment is untenable, however, once we consider how the children in Kristiansand actually engaged with YouTube. In the following excerpt, Matilde describes her favorite candy:

I really like Japan. Because there they actually have a special kind of candy that I have seen on YouTube ... I have never tasted it before, but I think it actually tastes really good. Because sometimes I feel that I can know how it tastes. And usually I think it tastes good.

The synesthetic dimension of children's YouTube practices indicates how the merging of screen space and viewer space enables access to sensory experiences that go beyond the visual. According to Deleuze (1986), cinema breaks with natural perception by offering inhuman optics such as slow motion and extreme close-ups, which operate on an affective, pre-conscious level. The affective dimension of YouTube videos also surfaced in children's reports of fear, such as when one girl described her response to the Japanese horror movie *The Ring*:⁸

Samara is a ghost. She kind of comes out of the TV and takes your heart, and she made me really scared ... We were supposed to be working on a project in class, and then she came on YouTube. There was a freaky noise ... Some started crying. I wasn't among those who started crying, but when I got home, during the night, I woke up and I had dreamt about her. It was really scary. Even though I knew that it was a movie, that it wasn't for real, but still.

Japanese YouTube videos were particularly popular among the kids. Although none of them had ever been to Japan, the children described the neon-lit streets of Tokyo in detail and gave elaborate accounts of new technological innovations they had watched on YouTube. Matilde told me about how, in the darkness of her room at night, she had watched the Tokyo skyline on YouTube: "There's lots of machines and lights and stuff in Tokyo. It's very pretty, because there are lots of beautiful lights there every night."

Like Matilde, most of the kids in my study were children of immigrants. Having spent many school vacations visiting family in their parents' home country, several children described these places in terms of lack and backwardness when compared to contemporary Norway. They talked about driving on dirt roads rather than regular streets or encountering toilets that only consisted of a hole in the ground. In contrast, the children often framed their descriptions of Japan in future-oriented terms. For example, Matilde told me about a documentary film about Japanese robot factories:

I have a feeling we are becoming lots of robots everywhere. Because once I was watching TV with my dad, and there was like an *entire* room full of robots ... So I started thinking about it. There as so many new machines and stuff. So I think it's going to happen. But I don't know when. Because it takes so long to make something new. Sometimes you have to test it. And sometimes you have to find the stuff you need. And sometimes you don't even know what you need ... So there's a whole lot of stuff they need to know. But I have a feeling that it's going to happen.

By bringing alternative futures into view, the children's YouTube practices indicate how "the visual image has a legible function beyond its visible function" (Deleuze, 1986: 15). Diverging from portrayals of Japan as "the nightmare future of any industrialized country" (see Napier, 2007: 92), Matilde and her friends embraced the promise of a better future that accompanied Japanese products and aesthetics. The children's optimistic views contrast sharply with the pessimism toward the future found among contemporary Japanese youth (Allison, 2013). Several children expressed a desire to travel to Japan. One boy showed his friends handwritten notes copied from Google Translate and told them he was teaching himself Japanese in the hope of one day visiting Tokyo.

Techno-animistic encounters allowed the children to playfully explore the possibility that Japan was not just a spatial destination, but also a temporal one. Rather than thinking of the past and the future as opposite terms, both can be approached as aspects of "a dynamic field of potential relations" (Pedersen, 2012: 144). In this perspective, what occurs in "the moment" is not restricted to what occurs in "the present," because each moment "contains all pasts and all futures as virtual potentialities" (Pedersen, 2012: 143). The idea that the future in Norway will be somewhat like the present in Japan lends itself to Grosz's (2001) suggestion that technological change is often accompanied by "fantasies surrounding the eruption of new and altogether different futures" (p. 75). The temporal dimension of children's fantasies about Japan indicates how YouTube provided not only a light in the dark but also a glimpse into the future.

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Notes

1. Hatsune Miku Live Party 2013 in Kansai. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rL5YKZ9ecpg> (accessed 27 June 2014).
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4. How to Make an Origami Ninja Star (Shuriken)—Double-Sided. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r49V-J6Ikt4> (accessed 27 June 2014).
5. All quotes from the children have been translated from Norwegian by the author. Matilde's family immigrated to Norway from South America, and like many of her classmates she spoke both Norwegian and her parents' language at home.
6. See note 3.
7. Hatsune Miku Makeup. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVmtZsr8FfA> (accessed 27 June 2014).

8. Ringu awesome scene. Available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_GQO1oWEwg (accessed 27 June 2014).

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